Community engagement to advance health equity: Strategies and tips

Through their Health Equity in Prevention (HEiP) initiative, which began in 2013, the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota awarded contracts to 13 organizations working to implement policy, systems, and environmental changes to support health and advance health equity. Eleven of these organizations continue to receive HEiP awards today. The Promising Practices series highlights successful strategies used by these organizations and important lessons learned that can be used by other organizations to inform their work.

Background

Each of the 11 organizations currently funded through the HEiP initiative focused their efforts to advance health equity through policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) changes on different health issues and in different Minnesota communities. Some examples of the work being done through the initiative include: passing ordinances to restrict tobacco sales; changing policies to increase access to healthy foods; and including community input in public transit planning. One common aspect of the organizations' work is a strong emphasis on community engagement. The HEiP-funded organizations have worked closely with community members to better understand issues impacting their health and to elevate members' priorities in a range of decisions. As a result of their collective efforts, the HEiP-funded organizations have engaged at least 2,500 community members in community conversations or as volunteers, advocates, and leaders.

Representatives from all funded organizations saw community engagement as critical in their success implementing PSE changes that will ultimately improve community health. Yet, there is little guidance available in the literature about ways organizations can effectively engage communities in their work to advance health equity. In October 2015, representatives from all 11 HEiP-funded organizations convened to explore similarities and differences in their community engagement approaches. This summary defines community engagement, captures their lessons learned, and provides tips to other organizations interested in doing similar work.

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What is community engagement?

Often, the term community engagement is used too broadly to describe any type of community member involvement in a project. Among HEiP- funded organizations working to advance health equity, **community engagement** is a long-term process in which community members are partners in identifying action steps that can be implemented to improve health. It is far more involved than either **community outreach** activities that are intended to share information with or seek input from community members, or short-term **community involvement** initiatives where members participate in a limited capacity to reach a goal defined by an organization.

When done effectively, community engagement is an intentional practice that includes the diverse perspectives of the community, addresses power dynamics, fosters strong relationships, and leads to action. Organizations focusing on community engagement must work deliberately to build long-term trusting relationships and to be open and responsive to community input.

What are the key ingredients for effective community engagement to advance health equity?

Representatives of all HEiP-funded organizations were asked to identify up to five key ingredients needed for effective community engagement. These ideas were organized into the following themes:

- **A focus on relationships.** Effective community engagement views community members as partners in the work, not clients to be served, while striving to lift up the wisdom, experience, expertise, and leadership of community members. Organizations know who community

leaders are and take the time to ask where and how community members prefer to gather together. One-on-one meetings were cited by multiple organizations as an effective strategy for building trusting relationships with community members and understanding their priorities. When strong relationships are formed, community members can contribute talents and participate in ways that the organization may not have been previously considered or perceived as feasible.

Transparency in goals, scope, and expectations. Too often, community members are asked for multiple rounds of input without learning how their feedback was used, resulting in community distrust and fatigue. Organizations working to engage community members must be clear about what they are asking of the community, including the time commitment required and the decisions that their input will influence. When community members raise a concern that an organization cannot address, this limitation needs to be acknowledged in a transparent way.

In addition, it is important for community members to understand the role they are being asked to play in the context of the entire project. When community engagement is needed over a long period of time, community members must have opportunities to reflect on the contributions they've made to date and reassess their interest in continued involvement. Reporting back to community members is critical in demonstrating transparency and building trust.

- **Listen to understand.** Effective community engagement allows the space and time for community members to share stories, describe needs, and consider potential solutions. By intentionally listening, organizations gain an understanding of the community and establish the trust required in order to work in partnership

with community members. Organizations that effectively engage community members are connected to neighborhoods, events, and community resources. They understand the current local landscape, including key community leaders, as well as the community's history. By knowing the community at a deeper level, organizations are able to thoughtfully engage community members in settings where they are most comfortable and support community members in leading the work. This community knowledge also helps organizations recognize and flow with the momentum of work that is already underway, rather than working with community members to meet their own agenda.

Understanding the community also requires organizations to be attentive to culture. Organizations need to recognize the many ways the community members identify themselves and strive to be culturally aware and respectful in their work. Over time, as organizations develop cultural competence, they also expand their capacity to do engagement in ways that incorporate different cultural approaches. Organizations also need to acknowledge and intentionally address the inherent power dynamics that take place when organizations work in partnership with community members.

- **A goal of fostering community capacity.**
  Effective organizations approach their community engagement work: a) recognizing the existing leadership and capacity within the community they engage and with and b) building capacity deliberately by supporting other community organizations and increasing opportunities for community leadership among both adults and youth. This requires organizations to consider their own bias in how they approach partnership with community members. Then, to consider

their willingness to change organizational practices that do not align with approaches that support increased community capacity.

- **Activities that bring people together.**
  Organizations that effectively advance health equity often use activities, rather than meetings, to bring community members together to discuss issues. Food tastings or cooking meals together can be ways to bring community members together to discuss their connection to food. When aligned with community interests, activities offer easy ways for community members to engage in conversation that feels natural and comfortable to community members. Organizations with a direct service arm can also consider ways that a program activity, such as a health screening, food shelf visit, or participation in a class, can be entry points for community member involvement in broader decision-making and advocacy efforts.

- **Strategic partnerships at multiple levels.**
  Effective organizations understand that community engagement is about working in partnership with community members and developing approaches that are mutually beneficial. They also act in solidarity with other organizations that hold community engagement as a key value by being involved in the community, attending community events, and supporting common issues.

- **Awareness of organizational capacity.**
  Effective organizations manage partnership at multiple levels simultaneously. As organizations build their capacity to effectively engage community members, their involvement may grow to respond to increased community interest and an organizational commitment to conduct their work differently. While increased demand can stress organizational resources, it also presents opportunities for organizations to

connect the community with mainstream institutions and to help funders understand the resources necessary to work in partnership with community. Organizations may also need to help mainstream institutions consider their readiness to accept and respond to community input and build capacity to work in partnership with the community.

- **Use of effective tactics**. Social media and local newspapers may be a better way to reach community members than traditional approaches, such as reports or formal presentations. In addition, non-traditional approaches that incorporate art, videos, storytelling, or other creative forms of expression can often better capture community voices than conventional approaches. While effective organizations aim to work productively to maintain partnerships at multiple levels, they also understand when they need to use tactics that agitate in order to challenge assumptions and move discussion to action.

What are common challenges to effective community engagement to advance health equity?

- **Finding adequate time and resources.** Not all funders understand the importance of community engagement and provide funding for these efforts. To see the value of greater community involvement, effective community engagement strategies often take more time than funders anticipate or allow for, making it difficult for organizations to work in true partnership with community members while still meeting grant timelines and reporting requirements. It can also be challenging to find funding sources that fully cover the costs needed to work in

partnership with community members, including stipends and financial support to community members and partner organizations involved in the work.

- **Attracting and retaining staff.** Ideally, an organization's staff should reflect the diversity of the community. However, some nonprofit organizations have difficulty attracting and retaining skilled staff who could earn higher pay in other sectors.

- **Finding the right level of involvement for highly-involved community members.** Effective community leaders are often highly involved in the community and asked to participate in multiple initiatives. Burnout can occur when individuals are spread too thin or ask to participate for extended periods of time.

- **Saying no to opportunities for collaboration.** Successful community engagement efforts can attract the interest of other initiatives and open the door to new partnerships. However, some opportunities need to be turned down in order to ensure time and resources are available to focus attention on current priorities, rather than shifting to accommodate another organization's agenda. In addition, organizations with expertise in community engagement are often asked to share what they have learned or provide consultation without compensation for their time. As a result, organizations that engage community members effectively are often working to balance an interest in partnering with others with the practical considerations of time, capacity, and funding.

- **Shifting from individual interventions to systems change initiatives.** When organizations focus their efforts on advancing health equity, there is a need to expand their work into

impacting policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) changes. As a result, organizational staff and community members need information to understand how neighborhood conditions impact health and how they can work to influence key decisions that lead to PSE changes.

■ **Letting go of control and sharing power.** When organizations work in true collaboration with community members, work plans and timelines may need to adjust and adapt to respond to community input. These changes can be difficult for organizations that often make decisions with autonomy.

How can organizations build their capacity to effectively engage community?

The discussion participants also reflected on the ways their organizations have increased their capacity to do effective community engagement. While a number of strategies emerged in the conversation, many fell into three broad themes: a clear mission, strategic decisions, and training.

■ **Set a clear mission.** When the organization's mission focuses on advancing equity, racial and health equity is considered explicitly in all organizational decisions, including staff recruitment and hiring, project timelines, and the allocation of resources to support and expand their efforts. Community engagement then becomes a natural and expected part of the organization's work, rather than a special project.

■ **Make strategic decisions.** Difficult choices must be made to help focus and fully support an organization's community engagement efforts. Organizational partnerships need to be grounded in shared values around equity and ensure there are mutual benefits to all parties. Investing time

to support community leaders helps foster long-term partnerships and a shared commitment to address the community's interests and needs.

■ **Provide training.** Training opportunities for staff, community members, and organizational partners establish a common language and shared vision for health equity. These principles can be reinforced when onboarding new staff and through ongoing professional development. Board member participation in racial equity and health equity training can also help them fully understand the organization's mission and values to advance health equity, as well as the importance of community engagement.

How can organizations begin their work to use community engagement to advance health equity?

When done in partnership with community members, community engagement is a process that is non-linear, adaptable, and iterative. Yet, it can be effective when grounded in a common language and shared values. The organizational representatives who participated in the discussion identified the following key tips for organizations wanting to begin the important work of using community engagement to advance health equity:

■ **Focus on establishing trusting relationships with community members.** Organizations need to be transparent in their interests and aware of the power they hold before they can fully support community members as decision-makers and advocates for long-term change. They also need to develop a deep understanding of the community before they can support community members in ways that are truly useful.

- **Use multiple approaches to connect with community members.** Informal activities, such as cooking and sharing meals, can be important in building trust and fostering new relationships.

- **Look for ways that the organization's work aligns with current community priorities and efforts.** Solutions to community concerns can be co-created when organizations have worked proactively to build trusting relationships with community members, rather than reaching out only when a new funding opportunity emerges.

- **Have a clear commitment to fostering equity in your organization's mission, budgeting practices, hiring policies, and engagement activities.** Organization staff should reflect the community that they are working with to create meaningful change.

- **Create spaces and time to genuinely listen to community members' stories, experiences, ideas, and observations.** This information is key to forming the foundation for future work and building trust. It must be done repeatedly and in a way that informs the work of the entire organization, not only a few staff working on a specific project.

- **Don't be afraid of making mistakes in the process of engaging diverse communities to advance health equity.** Mistakes offer opportunities to be vulnerable, learn, and addresses biases. When addressed with honesty and transparency, these missteps can lead to greater trust and stronger relationships.

Acknowledgements

Additional resources

Building the Field of Community Engagement. Led by Nexus Community Partners, six core organizations in the Twin Cities region are partners in a collaborative initiative to "magnify and elevate the power of community engagement to change the way problems are solved and resources are invested." For more information about the initiative and key resources, see: http://www.buildthefield.org.

Health equity assessments: A brief review. As part of the evaluation of the HEiP initiative, Wilder Research completed a focused review of self-assessment tools organizations can use to determine their readiness to address racial and health equity in their work. The summary provides a brief overview of each tool reviewed and suggestions for the types of organizations that may find the tool most useful in their work. See:
http://www.wilder.org/WilderResearch/Publications/Studies/Health%20Equity%20in%20Prevention/Health%20Equity%20Assessments%20-%20A%20Brief%20Review.pdf

For more information about the HEiP initiative funded by the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota, see: http://www.centerforpreventionmn.com/what-we-do/our-current-initiatives/health-equity-in-prevention

For evaluation results for the HEiP initiative, including examples of promising practices being used to advance health equity, see the Wilder Research website:
http://www.wilder.org/studies/Health%20Equity%20in%20Prevention/1535